

Research Update is published by the Butler Center for Research for Research to share significant scientific findings from the field of addiction treatment research.

## RESEARCHUPDATE

BUTLER CENTER FOR RESEARCH OCTOBER 2010

# Prevalence of Adolescent Substance Abuse

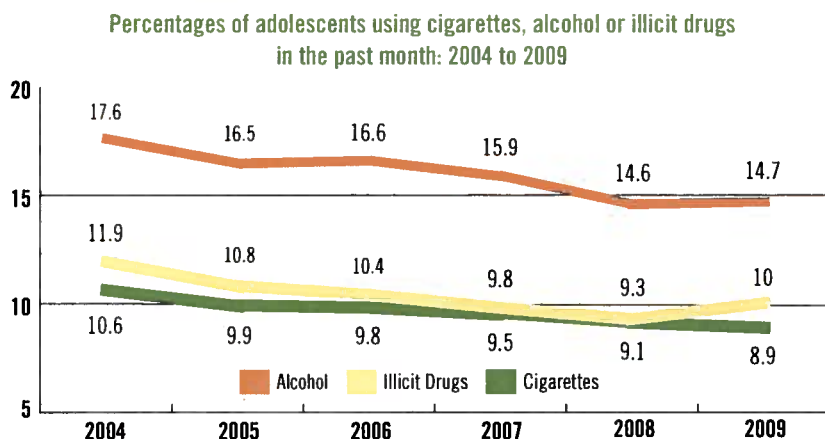
Adolescent substance abuse continues to be a significant societal problem. It is well established that regular use of substances during the teenage years increases the likelihood of developing a substance use disorder (SUD)<sup>1</sup>. Substance abuse in adolescents is associated with a number of adverse consequences, such as increased medical and mental health problems, absenteeism, and disciplinary problems in school. In some cases, substance abuse can lead to unintentional injury and even death<sup>2</sup>.

Recent research suggests that primary care office visits hold promise as a way to detect when teens are abusing alcohol and/or drugs. The American Medical Association and other national organizations recommend that all primary care providers screen each adolescent patient for alcohol and drug use during annual physicals. In a recent study of 12- to 18-year-olds receiving routine outpatient medical care in a New England health care network, nearly 15% had positive results on a substance abuse screening test. This percentage was even higher among teens who were sick; 23.2% of teens who visited the doctor specifically because they were ill screened positive for substance abuse, as opposed to only 7.1% of teens who went in for well-child care visits<sup>3</sup>.

### SAMHSA's National Survey on Drug Use and Health

Trends in adolescent substance abuse have been systematically examined for the last several years by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Each year SAMHSA conducts a large scale, nationwide survey called the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). A randomly selected sample of respondents answers a number of questions about substance use, mental health, and health service utilization over the past year.

The graph below shows the percentage of respondents aged 12-17 who reported using alcohol, cigarettes, or illicit drugs within the past month. In addition to alcohol use in general, respondents also provided information about binge drinking and heavy alcohol use during



SOURCE: SAMHSA, 2004-2009 NSDUHs

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### THE HAZELDEN EXPERIENCE

Hazelden treats young people with substance abuse problems. In 2009, the Hazelden Center for Youth and Families in Plymouth, Minnesota provided residential addiction treatment services to 652 young people aged 14 to 25. Over 50% of patients were dependent on both alcohol and at least one other drug; 86% were dependent on marijuana and 66% were dependent on alcohol.

In addition to substance dependence, many youth attending treatment at Hazelden have mental health concerns. In 2009, 88% of residential patients had at least one psychological disorder in addition to substance dependence, and 22% reported at least one prior inpatient treatment episode for mental health issues.

### CONTROVERSIES & QUESTIONS

Drug abuse patterns and trends vary considerably within and across communities. These differences are often undetected by large, population-based national surveys. Therefore, it is critical for communities to be diligent in their attempts to acquire and utilize locally generated data pertaining to drug abuse among youth.

### HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

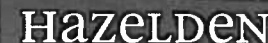
In spite of continued and sometimes exclusive emphasis on the dangers and problems associated with illegal drug abuse, the most prevalent drugs of abuse among adolescents are legal within adult American society: alcohol and cigarettes. Adolescents impaired by alcohol and other drugs are at increased risk of injury, car crashes, falls, burns, drowning, and suicide<sup>2</sup>. Tobacco-related disease is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States<sup>4</sup>.

**Educators:** School curriculums should include annual educational sessions about the dangers of alcohol and drug use.

**Parents:** Take an active role in educating your children about the dangers of substance abuse, and have frequent conversations about what they are doing and with whom they are spending time. Take action to ensure that alcohol, cigarettes, and prescription drugs like Vicodin and Oxycontin are not readily available in the home.

**Health Care Professionals:** All routine medical check ups for children and adolescents should include a screening test for substance use. Regular medical visits provide an excellent and under-utilized opportunity for screening and brief intervention with adolescents engaging in hazardous use.

## Prevalence of Adolescent Substance Abuse



the past month. Use of all substances has decreased somewhat over time; the percentage of adolescents reporting past month use of each substance in 2009 is lower than the percentage in 2004. However, recent data suggest that illicit drug use may be increasing. Whereas use of cigarettes and alcohol remained fairly stable between 2008 and 2009, the percentage of adolescents reporting illicit drug use increased during this time period (from 9.30% in 2008 to 10% in 2009)<sup>4</sup>.

Alcohol was the most commonly used substance across the six year period. In addition to alcohol use in general, SAMHSA also asked respondents about binge drinking and heavy alcohol use in the past month. In 2009, 10.9% of adolescents reported at least one episode of hazardous drinking (binge drinking or heavy drinking) during the past month. This percentage is nearly identical to 2008 (10.8%). Marijuana was the most frequently used illicit drug, with 7.3% of respondents reporting past month use in 2009. This percentage was significantly higher than the percentage for 2008 (6.7%), suggesting that marijuana use among adolescents may be increasing<sup>1</sup>.

Another important finding regarding adolescent substance use pertains to gender: overall, adolescent males are more likely than females to report past month use of substances. In 2009, 10.6% of males reported past month illicit drug use, compared to 9.4% of females. In addition, the percentage of males using illicit drugs significantly increased from 2008 to 2009 (from 9.5% to 10.6%) whereas use among females remained fairly stable (9.1% vs. 9.4%). Males were more likely than females to report past month marijuana use and were less likely to perceive serious risk associated with marijuana use<sup>5</sup>. In 2009, males were also more likely than females to report heavy alcohol use or binge drinking in the past month (11.9% vs. 9.9% respectively).

### Nonmedical use of prescription medicines

Adolescents also engage in nonmedical use of over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription medications. Commonly abused over-the-counter medications include cold preparations containing stimulant-based compounds like ephedrine and dextromethorphan. When taken in large amounts, these drugs can produce hallucinations and other dissociative experiences similar to those caused by hallucinogens like PCP and ketamine ("Special K"). SAMHSA reports that in 2006, 3.70% of youths aged 12 to 17 reported abusing OTC cough and cold medications at least once in their lifetime; 1.90% reported use in the past year<sup>6</sup>.

Adolescents also abuse Vicodin, Oxycontin, and other opiates prescribed for the management of pain. According to the 2009 NSDUH, 2.7% of adolescents aged 12 to 17 reported nonmedical use of these drugs in the past month; 9.70% reported using them at least once in their lifetime<sup>7</sup>. In 2005, SAMHSA asked a national sample of young adults where they obtain access to these drugs. Among respondents who reported use in the last year, over 50% obtained them from a friend or relative free of charge. Another 11% reported buying them from a friend or relative and 3.8% reported taking them from a friend or relative without asking. Because of their high addictive potential, there has been growing concern about the recreational use of these medications, especially among youth and young adults<sup>8</sup>.

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The Butler Center for Research informs and improves recovery services and produces research that benefits the field of addiction treatment. We are dedicated to conducting clinical research, collaborating with external researchers, and communicating scientific findings.

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**Patricia Owen, Ph.D.,** former Director

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